Oscar Wilde: Constructing the Self

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OSCAR WILDE:
CONSTRUCTING THE SELF

By
Elisabeth Erin Pankl
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Oscar Wilde’s construction of the self. Three major aspects of Wildean literary work serve as handles for this thesis examination. They are the Wildean interpretation of *theoria*, Wilde’s literary technique and philosophical assertion of masks and poses and Wilde’s favor of the social dandy.

In addition to these three aspects, this thesis utilizes four of Wilde’s works as primary sources. These are *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, “The Decay of Lying,” and “The Critic as Artist.”

Like most current critiques of Wilde, this thesis relies on many of the reading strategies of postmodern criticism. Additionally, this study takes into account the overall critical history and personal biography of Wilde.

Finally, this thesis asserts that Wilde’s constructed self is a self that is multi-essenced and, therefore, in direct conflict with the traditional Western notion of the self.
OSCAR WILDE:
CONSTRUCTING THE SELF

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Master of Arts

by
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Master of Arts

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Critical analysis and historical research into the life and work of Oscar Wilde has been and continues to be controversial. Not only is Wilde an intentionally elusive artist, but also his milieu, the fin de siècle, was a time of significant transition in the literary tradition of British writers. In his study of this problematic time period, Journey Through Despair, John Lester states, “My contention is that the years from 1880 to 1914 severely jarred and shifted the bearings of man’s imaginative life and left him at times bewildered as to how to recover his lost meaning and purpose” (xxi). Therefore, a study of any writer during this transitionary time period immediately creates problems for the critic. When a writer is examined who is a mythologized, flamboyant, subversive homosexual who relished misunderstanding, the already problematic nature of literary study is increased. However, not only do the problems accumulate but also the possibilities. This intriguing situation leads the critic to a position that Wilde would have advocated, the position of confronting an endless number of creations ready and waiting for the imaginative power of one individual. And whether or not the critic leans toward Ian Small’s championing of postmodern theory in revaluing Wilde or agrees with Adam Gopnik’s stinging retort, it is clear that there is ample room for critical exchanges in Wildean study. And in Gopnik’s view, it is a “sure thing that [Wilde] would read them all: a man who spent his life trying to make certain that no one would ever forget him would be ecstatic to know that no one has” (78).

Wilde’s fin de siècle status places him, according to Lester, “in the generation of the turn of the century [that] was hyper-sensitive of its identity”
(3). The division between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century in terms of literary sensibility is extremely problematic and, consequently, identity issues spawn out of this confusion. The rapid succession of new ideas, new technologies and new atrocities during this transitionary period leaves the nature of identity, especially literary identity, open for numerous debates. Identity issues are especially significant for Wilde and other homosexual writers of the period. According to Jay Losey, Wilde’s work is “an attempt to engage in a kind of polemical debate [...] to develop an emergent discourse on the inseparability of sexuality and identity” (251). The conception and construction of the self is one of the issues that is central in a critical discussion of Oscar Wilde. Wilde’s construction of the self is fundamentally focused on creating a self that is multi-essenced, a self that is complex, and a self that holds growth as perhaps its ultimate moral achievement. Wilde’s language to describe this ideal construction is ideal in and of itself. Yet it differs from other stances of idealism because systematically reaching these ideals is not advocated by Wilde. As Gilbert states in “The Critic as Artist”:

> It is sometimes said that the tragedy of an artist’s life is that he cannot realize his ideal. But the true tragedy that dogs the steps of most artists is that they realize their ideal too absolutely. For, when the ideal is realized, it is robbed of its wonder and its mystery. (568)

Creating the ideal and keeping it unattainable is the masterpiece, the ultimate artistic achievement for Wilde.

A Critical History

The critical history of Oscar Wilde has undergone significant changes within the last 30 years. As noted by Ian Small in *Oscar Wilde Revalued*, the advent of postmodern theory, including the use of such paradigms and reading
strategies as feminist, deconstructionist, and new historicist critiques, has opened up and expanded inquiry into Wilde's work (175). Small views this change as positive; previous to the 1960s, research on Wilde was far more biased and tended to separate, rather militantly, his life from his work. Small notes that not only was specific research on Wilde rather limited, but also that the fin de siecle and Wilde's place in its literary culture were somewhat marginalized and trivialized. For evidence, Small cites Graham Hough's The Last Romantics, a work that gives ample discussion to the Victorian sages John Ruskin and Walter Pater and hefty analysis to W.B. Yeats but leaves a significantly small portion of discussion to the fin de siecle and Wilde. Treatments such as Hough's are why so many current critical works, such as Small's, are titled with words such as "revalued" and "rediscovered." There is a consensus among current critics that somehow Wilde's literary ability and place have been misread and denied since 1900, when, according to Regenia Gagnier, "Wilde died because, as he said, it would be too much for the English that he should live into the twentieth century" (Introduction 1).

Two of the major factors that Small cites for these misreadings are Wilde's sexual orientation and subsequent imprisonment for crimes of indecency. According to Small, these factors have historically served as blocks to authentic research into Wilde's work. Wilde's mythologized pose as a "flamboyant homosexual iconoclast" (5) often impels critics, biographers, and historians to state their moral and political sympathies. This is largely where many traditional Wildean biases originate. Wilde's infamous trials and conviction for sexual indecency also call out for readers to construct and to justify a judgment. These types of emotionally, politically, and religiously charged judgments tend to cast Wilde as either a monster or a martyr, the latter likely more pleasing to a writer "who courted martyrdom" (Gopnik 85). For instance, William York Tindall's survey, Forces in Modern British Literature, observes that Wilde's "punishment
was less the punishment of particular misdemeanors than the symbolic revenge of a class upon artists and their arts” (8). Tindall certainly views Wilde as a martyr for the whole group of English artists he refers to as “the exiled” (5). Because Wilde has for so long been automatically stuffed into the role of the British cult hero for the artists who began dismissing the middle class in the later part of the nineteenth century, his work in and of itself has been shrouded by his mythologized rebellious role.

Yet despite these misdirected setbacks in critical history, Small remains optimistic and asserts that the last 30 years of critical history have worked to create a scholarly atmosphere in which Wilde’s shocking and disturbing sexuality and his work “no longer exclude each other” (5) to the same debilitating degree. Giving ample credit to postmodern critical approaches, Small claims that critics are no longer required to give the complementary judgment on Wilde’s life and then move, isolated and in a sense intellectually wounded, into his work. Yet according to Small, the biases, though decreased, continue into the present time. Most notable in Small’s complaint is Wilde’s biography by Richard Ellmann. Though Small concedes that it is the best available, he also claims that Ellmann’s work is “not the life of Wilde but the tragedy of Wilde” (20). Small feels that by heightening the tragic events of Wilde’s life, Ellmann adds more to the Wildean myth. Small would prefer that this myth be laid to rest and utterly eliminated. However, Small does give Ellmann ample credit for uncovering historical details hitherto unknown to the general public. For example, he praises Ellmann’s claim that Wilde’s aesthetic fashioning really began developing at Trinity in Dublin rather than at Oxford as crucial to an important study of Wilde (18). Ellmann’s assertion casts new light onto the subject of the Irish Wilde, an identity largely unexplored in previous years. Yet even with the benefits perhaps outweighing the negatives of Ellmann’s biography, the events and created myth of Wilde’s life continue to provide unique and frustrating hurdles for Wildean critics and
readers.

Added to the biases of Wilde's readers, Small blames Wilde himself for the difficulty of Wildean study. Small claims,

Wilde was one of the first public figures consciously to manipulate the media in order to create a public personality. Hence, the first mythologizing and fictionalizing of Wilde's life was by Wilde himself. (12)

Wilde's continual literary boast that he wanted to be misunderstood is actively played out in his work and life by his own fascination with artificiality. Additionally, Jay Losey contends that homosexual writers such as Wilde deliberately "disguised the self by creating a counter-discourse on sexuality" (251). Wilde's desire and need to confuse the public worked splendidly in the fin de siecle and the effect continues to the present time. Po Fang's dissertation, The Aesthetics of Self-Fashioning: Pater, Wilde, and Yeats, examines Wilde's passion for artificially constructing the self through his works, aesthetic philosophies, and artistic influences. Fang contends that Wilde's deliberate elusiveness is a result of his intense focus on the self and its manifestation both constructively, through his creative work, and destructively, through his short life and its painful end. Fang's work encompasses many of the postmodern trends that Small cites in his positive estimation of new critical study on Wilde, and it also gives significant attention to Wilde's place and influence in fin de siecle culture.

Besides deliberately manipulating his public persona, Wilde also practiced a deliberate and iconoclastic form of homage or imitation, which many critics have labeled plagiarism. For instance, Wilde's contemplative ideal in "The Critic as Artist" is clearly based on Pater's essay on Wordsworth. Pater claims that, "The end of life is not action but contemplation--being as distinct from doing--a certain disposition of the mind: is, in some shape or other, the principle of all the higher morality" (Selected Writings 139). Similarly, in Wilde's essay, Gilbert
insists to Earnest, “the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming— that is what the critical spirit can give us” (579). Yet Small claims that Wilde stole “from his own work much more extensively than from all other authors” (99). Wilde’s technique lended itself to this “plagiarism.” Small notes his “devotion to the discrete phrase or line rather than the word as the smallest unit of composition” (100). Small also notes that Wilde began his writing with these choice phrases and lines, moving them from work to work and character to character as he continually revised. At first glance, a critic might dismiss Wilde’s repetition as laziness or sloppiness; however, Small claims that Wilde’s technique was deliberate and innovative. John Paul Riquelme agrees with Small and details this Wildean innovation. He states:

Throughout his career, Wilde had a reputation for using other writers’ language in ways that drew comments amounting to the charge of plagiarism. In that respect, his writing anticipates Eliot’s later sometimes unacknowledged borrowings, which challenge Romantic views of the artist’s originality. In the case of both writers, their modernist, anti-Romantic borrowings are intentional, motivated, and, because of the implications of the repeated language, creative. (621)

While it is clear that Wilde spent much of his life inventing himself, Adam Gopnik posits in his article “The Invention of Oscar Wilde” that current critics and academia are themselves inventing Wilde. Whereas Small views the advent of postmodern theory as an illuminating and liberating factor in the critical history of Wilde, Gopnik views these devices as being used for hostage purposes. In Gopnik’s opinion, Wilde and his works are held “hostage not just to sexual politics but to academic politics” (78). Or, in other words, Gopnik is disgusted with Wilde’s current mask of “pomo homo” (78). Gopnik calls for a
divergence from Wilde’s supposed relentless attack on Victorian values and middle class ethos and, additionally, for a closer critical look at the most original Wildean invention, “a form of comedy as pure as Mozart” (78). Gopnik does not devalue the attention to Wilde, but merely calls for a renewed sense of appreciation for the artistry which critics too often sacrificed to other ends. For example, Gopnik claims that “Wilde’s paradoxes are funnier than other people’s, and they are smarter about life” (84). Gopnik values for its own sake Wilde’s humor that is, in his opinion, too often used to satisfy academic conformity. This sounds quite similar to the “art for art’s sake” movement in Western literature that, though it originated with the French, was popularized by Wilde on his American tour (1882) and is so often associated with him.

Reviewing Literature and Defining Terms

In its examination of the construction of the ideal Wildean self, this study uses four primary works: The Picture of Dorian Gray, The Importance of Being Earnest, “The Decay of Lying,” and “The Critic as Artist.” Not only are these works focused on questions of art and identity, but they also aid in giving a new reader of Wilde a strong sampling of his most prominent genres--his novel, his plays, and his essays. It is in these genres that Wilde is at his best. Because Wilde’s short stories and poems tend to fall earlier in his career, they are less useful than later works in the critic’s articulation of the overall, mature aesthetic vision asserted by Wilde.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) chronicles the slow and grotesque destruction of a young aesthete, Dorian Gray, a man who surrenders his personality first to the moderate, principled, and adoring artist Basil Hallward, then to the dazzling, dandical, and influential Lord Henry, and finally to his own insatiable thirst for sensation and experience. The novel strongly reflects both the literary influence of the French Decadent Movement in the late nineteenth
century and Wilde’s lifelong fascination with decadent Catholicism. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* played a large role in Wilde’s trials. The novel’s language, setting, and action are overtly homoerotic. Its exploration and redefinition of the words and concepts of influence, watching, and fantasy incited harsh English disapproval of its “indecent” suggestions. Coinciding with its expression of homoeroticism, Wildean notions of the self and its ideal construction are plentiful in this text. In *a long the riverrun*, Ellmann claims that this novel “outraged heterosexual smugness” (9) and that because of it and other Wildean works “the taboo against writing about homosexual behavior or other forms of sexuality began to be lifted in England. Opening our eyes has been the principle labor of modern literature” (10). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not only serves to “open our eyes” in the larger context of modern literature. This novel also serves as a key to the development of the modern self.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is Wilde’s last and best known play. It demonstrates his comic wit at its best. In the play, two friends (Jack and Algernon), who are also secretly brothers, pursue and are pursued by two assertive females (Gwendolen and Cecily). These women are in love with the name Ernest, which is the crux of the play. The farce is situated in the quasi-aristocratic world of upper-class England, a world that Wilde knew well and enjoyed immensely until his disastrous and reckless decision to sue Lord Alfred Douglas’s father, the Marquis of Queensberry, for libel in 1895.

Gopnik sees *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a literary milestone for Wilde. He claims that this play “involved a reevaluation of [Wilde’s] own aestheticism” (82). Gopnik defines this reevaluation as Wilde’s observation that “his religion of art” (82) was becoming stale artistically. Gopnik summarizes Wilde’s epiphany with the rhetorical question, “If the aesthetic was becoming absurd, why not let the absurd become aesthetic?” (82) That rhetorical question is an excellent way to describe *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Additionally, the
play is a textbook example of Wilde’s use of masks and poses in constructing a multi-essenced self since the action rests on invented and mistaken identity.

“The Decay of Lying” (1889) is one of Wilde’s more influential essays. His argument is in direct opposition to the prevailing nineteenth century fiction genre of realism which insisted that the human experience was best expressed in the fictional recreation of day-to-day drudgery. Along with The Importance of Being Earnest, this essay is often credited by critics with explaining Wilde’s conception of the literary mask and pose as effective tools in constructing an multi-essenced self.

The essay is set up as a dialogue between two characters, Vivian and Cyril, interestingly the same names as Wilde’s two sons. Vivian is the prophet of the piece, a young intellectual who has written an essay lamenting the demise of the art of lying. Perhaps the most radical statement in the essay is Vivian’s insistence “that Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality” (160). In a long the riverrun, Richard Ellmann claims that with this statement Wilde turned Aristotle on his head [...]. It was a paradox that no one had been able to state so succinctly before, though it had been implied by the Romantics. The effect was not to divorce art from life [...] but to bring the two together again, though with the priorities changed. (7)

Ellmann aptly identifies Wilde’s emphasis on the self and the self’s place in nature with the Romantics, yet he also asserts that Wilde’s philosophy of the aesthetic self is not merely repetition, but insightful elaboration.

“The Critic as Artist” (1890) highlights much of the Paterian subjectivism in Wilde’s aesthetic beliefs about art and the self. Once again, the essay is in the form of a dialogue between two characters, Ernest and Gilbert. As with Vivian in “The Decay of Lying,” Gilbert is the prophet of the piece, trying to influence his earnest friend Ernest to accept the idea that art criticism is in fact more
important than art, that without criticism art would merely repeat itself. In his reevaluation of the status of critic, Gilbert employs radical, Paterian subjectivism ("I would call criticism a creation within a creation" [564]) and neo-Romantic self emphasis ("there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one" [557]). Wilde's critic is an excellent example of Wildean self-representation. According to Fang, "Foucault conceives this deliberate and continuous refashioning of one's self as an essential attitude of modernity" (152).

These four works are integral in a discussion of Wilde's conceptualization of the construction of the self. Not only do they provide the basic materials for this discussion, but they also point to Wilde's influences, his special talents, his elaboration of old ideas, and his development as a writer and thinker.

Additionally, these works address the larger identity issues of the fin de siècle and the development of the modern self.

Area of Inquiry

The primary area of inquiry for this thesis is an examination of Oscar Wilde's notion of constructing the self, a self that is, ultimately, not of one essence. Wilde's idea of the self is distinct from that of others who claim the self is of one essence, a fixed identity that is best expressed directly and sincerely. Wilde's conception of a self that is multi-essenced is strongly connected to his ideals of sexuality and human existence. For example, in The Picture of Dorian Gray the narrator condemns "the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence" (104). If human existence is carried out by the multi-essenced self, then the entire system of Victorian sincerity is called into question as well. The narrator of the novel questions and answers this dilemma: "Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities" (104).
Insincerity then becomes vital to a self which is multi-essenced because it allows that self to express or hide its complexity.

The Wildean multi-essenced self also contradicts conventional ideas of sexuality. For instance, Wilde advocates the free rein of what is now known as the Freudian concept of the pleasure principle (Fang 120). This aspect of human sexuality and existence was, according to Michel Foucault's *The Care of the Self*, repressed following the demise of Hellenic culture and the rise of the Roman Empire and Christianity in Western civilization. Foucault asserts that these two forces spawned a culture that developed a

mistrust of the pleasures, an emphasis on the consequences of their abuse for the body and the soul, a valorization of marriage and marital obligations [. . .]. A whole attitude of severity was manifested in the thinking of philosophers and physicians in the course of the first two centuries. (39)

This ideal, sexually repressive self of the last two millennia of Western civilization demands a self of one essence in order for that self to be monogamous, faithful and dependable. Yet Wilde’s notion of the self embraces the pleasure principle as an integral part of the aesthetic human existence.

This emphasis on the aesthetic does not mean that the Wildean self is necessarily amoral. Fang claims that in his development of the conceptual self, “Wilde advocates the primacy of physical life and its instinctual craving for joy and beauty as an elemental moral force” (110). Ellmann, in his Wilde biography, even goes so far as to call Wilde a moralist. He refers to Wilde as a moralist in the tradition of Blake, Nietzsche, and Freud (100). Additionally, Isobel Murray claims:

Wilde is never openly didactic in his epigrams, but his wit is none the less full of moral import. Characteristically Wilde poses as a cynic or preserves in a detached way the detached character of the
dandy, and he does his preaching very indirectly. To complete confusion, when Wilde does 'preach,' it is often a matter of attacking accepted moral rules and prejudices, in the interest of his growth principle [...] (xi-xii)

These elements of pleasure, joy, beauty, and perpetual growth combine to create a philosophy of life and existence that Wilde refers to time and again as New Hellenism or New Hedonism. Wilde's New Hellenism advocates a self that is contemplative, multi-essenced, and frighteningly influential.

Wilde's contemplative ideal stems directly from both Paterian influence and his intense study of Aristotle's *Ethics*. Aristotle's term for contemplation is *theoria* (Fang 215). In Wilde's view, it is this concept that determines the aesthetic life because it facilitates "the harmonious development of all one's powers" (Fang 130), a development that is essential to obtaining "supreme Aristotelian happiness and pleasure" (Fang 131).

*Pleasure* and *happiness* are key words in deciphering the importance of action Wilde's contemplative ideal. Wilde's fascination with the contemplative life is in many ways in opposition to the two most powerful forces in Victorian middle class ethos. In *Victorian People and Ideas*, Richard Altick claims these two forces are the strong movements of Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism (165). Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism, though theoretically in opposition to each other, both favor action, the urgent need for constant, industrious action. Neither of these camps see pleasure and happiness for the self as the goal of such action, nor do they see these qualities as agents of self-development. Consequently, this action is very unlike the action advocated by Wilde. Wilde proposed an ironic redefinition of action as a means to self-cultivation, a process he views as necessary for self-development.

Additionally, Wilde's elaboration on Pater's ideal of aesthetic historicism, an ideal, according to Fang, that is "close to the Arnoldian sense of culture and
criticism" (100), figures significantly in his conception of the contemplative life. Fang defines aesthetic historicism as “an enlarged aesthetic horizon as a result of a historical perspective” (20). Developing this sense of appreciation for, as Arnold put it, “the best that is known and thought in the world” (1527) requires contemplation from the self, not relentless action.

The pleasure that derives from the Wildean contemplative life manifests itself in both fantasy and the quasi-sexual act of watching. Watching is, certainly in Wilde’s time and to a certain extent in the present, the only publicly acceptable demonstration of homosexual love. It is a contemplative action that is at once pleasurable and defiant because it is a secret that cannot be revealed unless the watcher chooses to reveal it. Losey claims, “The emphasis on male gazing enables [. . .] Wilde to make the love that dare not speak its name ‘speak on its own behalf,’ as Foucault asserts, ‘to demand that its legitimacy or “naturality” be acknowledged’” (263). Watching lends itself to fantasy and fantasy is the primary vehicle of Wilde’s version of Freud’s pleasure principle (Fang 119-120). The contemplative acts of watching and fantasy form a type of “aesthetic spectatorship” (Fang 132) which Wilde advocates throughout his work. The Wildean contemplative self becomes multi-essenced through these processes of theoria. These passive activities contribute to a rich and full self-development for the responsive individual. This responsive individual is then able to envision and realize himself as being of more than one essence, as being complex, and, consequently, as needing tools of self-representation to sustain this varied-self existence.

Wilde’s idea of the self being multi-essenced is manifested primarily in his use of and adoration for masks and poses. Masks and poses appear in all of Wilde’s works included in this thesis, and they occur in various forms. Wilde creates characters in essays, plays, and fiction who are masks and poses for him. These characters also consciously assume masks and poses within the context of
the literary work. Finally, these characters have conversations concerning the nature of their masks and poses and the nature of masks and poses in general. It is strongly implied from the profuse use of the concepts of masks and poses that Wilde considered these as necessary elements in the construction of selfhood. In *a long the riverrun* Richard Ellmann claims that Wilde’s assertion “that if one looked for examples of decay, one would find them among the sincere, the honest, the earnest” is part of his defense against the traditional attack on decadent aestheticism (5). Wilde’s defense of decadent aestheticism also validates his technique of mask and pose because masks and poses serve to belittle sincerity, honesty, and earnestness.

Wilde’s constant exaggeration of personality, or personalities, is one of the means by which he creates his masks and poses. Wilde rejects the notion of a self possessing a true and sincere single personality and favors the notion of assuming various openly artificial personalities. In fact, in his essay “The Impermanence of Personality,” Lawrence Danson claims that “’personality’ is a Wildean keyword” (82-83). Wilde not only carries the importance of personality down from his Paterian education (84), but he also incorporates a modified use of personalities into his own aesthetic philosophy.

Wilde’s concentration on personality is complemented by the conversational tone of his work. For example, a primary way that Wildean characters assert their personalities is through the rampant use of conversational and paradoxical epigrams and aphorisms. These continual witty retorts intensify the speakers’ chosen personalities and serve to begin constructing possible new personalities for future use. These aids in personality construction are also polishers for the masks and poses of the characters. The paradoxical nature of these aphorisms and epigrams give an underlying sense of subjectivism to Wilde’s work. Not only does he support an artistic philosophy of subjectivism, but also he affirms “the artist’s subjective construction of reality”
Subjectivism is also played out in another of Wilde’s techniques of constructing the self, namely his interpretation of the societal dandy. This iconoclastic figure is Wilde’s favored social role, and therefore social self. In his examination of the construction of the modern self, *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor claims that “[a] self can never be described without reference to those who surround it” (35). Subjectivism figures into Wilde’s display of literary and personal dandyism because his dandy is continually subverting the testimonies and ideals of those persons and institutions around him, thereby describing and defining his dandiacal self.

While the dandy had been a figure in European society since the late eighteenth century, in the *fin de siècle* the role is reinterpreted by Wilde and others (Fang 142). This reinterpretation is significant because it was done within a context of a larger decadent movement, the ideal context for a dandical figure. Yet there are significant contradictory tensions within Wilde’s interpretation of decadent dandyism.

The social role of Wilde’s decadent dandy is not only riddled with contradictory tensions, but also Wilde constructs this social role as a powerfully influential role on the receptive individual. Wilde viewed himself as a disciple of many powerful influences--Pater, Ruskin, Aristotle, Plato--and his own self as a product of these influences. He uses this experience of influence, this type of intoxicating experience to help express the relations between the decadent dandy and his pupil in many works. Wilde’s dandy is highly influential because of his dualism as both “the critic and the artist” (Fang 210). The dandy both creates art and keeps that art fresh by continually reinventing it through subjective critique.

Not only is Wilde’s decadent dandy influential, but he is also a leader who redefines traditional notions of leadership. This aspect of Wilde’s dandyism is what largely constitutes this role as a social role or a social self because it is very
outwardly deliberate aspect. Wilde envisions a society which “must return to this ‘lost leader’” (Fang 227) for instruction on construction of the aesthetic life and the aesthetic self.

By examining Wildean ethos, masks/poses, and dandyism, this thesis strives to illuminate the complexity of Wilde’s idea of the self. As noted, Wilde asserts again and again that the self is in fact not of one essence. Not only is the Wildean self multi-essenced, but it is also powerful. Wilde in many respects exaggerates and intensifies the Romantic notion of man’s special, creative faculty. Wilde’s neo-Romantic philosophy is partially defined and explained in “The Critic as Artist.” Gilbert insists to Ernest,

> The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age. (557)

Wilde not only defends the essential and procreative art of criticism with this statement, but he also defends the importance of the self, the importance of asserting the ideal self through art. Much like his Romantic predecessor Percy Bysshe Shelley’s A Defence of Poetry, “an eloquent and enduring claim for the indispensability of the visionary and creative imagination in all the great human concerns” (Abrams 789), Wilde’s work seeks to enhance and enlarge the category of art and the self’s place within it.

Fang claims that Wilde’s overall literary goal was “the aim of perfecting the self” (1). In a time when attention was largely focused outwardly, whether imperial, philanthropic, technological, or monetary, Wilde spent much of his short life turning attention inwardly to the self and its importance in relation to art and to harmonious, Aristotelian existence. And by claiming the self as multi-essenced, Wilde allowed both himself and continues to allow his readers an innovative and invigorating aesthetic experience.
This thesis addresses Wilde's ideal of the multi-essenced self by examining the three primary areas of *theoria*, masks and poses, and the social dandy. The material on *theoria* illuminates the historical, intellectual, and social factors in Wilde's construction. Also this section highlights some significant tensions within Wildean thought. The material on masks and poses develops crucial insights into how Wilde's unique literary techniques facilitate the construction of a multi-essenced self. And finally, the material on the social dandy demonstrates how Wilde visualized and refigured a somewhat marginal social figure into a prophetic and living art form.
CHAPTER II
THE WILDEAN ETHOS

Oscar Wilde’s ethos is exhibited throughout his works. While his personal life raged with activity, Wilde advocated his version of Aristotle’s concept of *theoria*, or contemplation, as an ideal state for the self. For Wilde, this state of *theoria* is ideal because it demands a removal of the self from the vulgar, the commonplace, and the inartistic. Moreover, Wilde elevates the state of contemplation because it is a constructed state. It is a mode of operation that is man’s creation, not nature’s, and is therefore more beautiful. Fang claims, “Wilde finds a rich inner life more fulfilling because it transcends the sordid and vulgar real world, and because it is constructed and refined by human imagination” (7).

Of course, ultimately, Wilde finds himself wallowing in the sordid during the height of his popularity and literary success. It is a period that Wilde referred to as “feasting with panthers,” being at least partially aware of its darkness. This seediness is one of the reasons the public, court, and jury were so unrelenting concerning Wilde’s predicament. He had cultivated a state of contemplative artificiality in his work that really had little bearing on his day-to-day private life, and people were outraged to find out this conscious duplicity. In *Oscar Wilde*, Ellmann situates the reader historically with this tension between Wilde and the public. He states:

> From late 1892, Wilde saw his life divide more emphatically between a clandestine, illegal aspect and a overt, declarable side. The more he consorted with rough but ready boys, in deliberate self-abandonment, the more he cultivated a public image of
disinterestedness and self-possession. (390)

The concept of *theoria* and its superiority runs relentlessly through Wilde's work. In fact, Wilde is extremely pointed in extinguishing the English adoration for constant activity. In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert insists persuasively that "the one person who has more illusions than the dreamer is the man of action" (559). Not only does Wilde seek to eliminate devotion to industrious activity, but he also ridicules it, disparaging its importance in the overall operation and welfare of the world. This English activity reaches a feverish point in the Victorian age with the powerful and influential, as well as surprisingly complementary, forces of Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism.

**Evangelicalism/Utilitarianism**

Though Utilitarianism is ruthlessly pragmatic and Evangelicalism favors self-denial for the soul's sake and not simply for its usefulness in day-to-day life, both movements insist on the necessity of work, the necessity of action. According to David Newsome, these camps even "[o]ccasionally, [...] for conflicting reasons, [...] found themselves fighting the same battles" (58). Contemplation is certainly not a high priority in either. A self that thrives within these movements is essentially a self that has no time for contemplation. Whether as a good Utilitarian the self is concerned with creating industrious business or passing laws that are for the good of the many, or as a committed Evangelical the self is concerned with contributing to the great "Victorian philanthropic and humanitarian efforts" (Altick 166), the state of contemplation achieves little for either of these selves. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the response of Lord Henry, Wilde's Paterian inspired contemplative ideal (Fang 130), to the call for a solution to the East End problem is, "I am quite content with philosophic contemplation" (29). This response astounds the other guests at the dinner party because it is a response that demands a paralysis of action in a
society which assumes that action is the "solution for personal distress" (Altick 171) and all other societal ills.

Victorian Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism also tended to discourage self-consciousness, the development of an aesthetic and imaginative existence in which the practice of contemplation is essential. The work of Utilitarians and Evangelicals is natural and active, not artificial and contemplative; therefore, in Wilde's view it is unaesthetic. Wilde explores this tension in "The Decay of Lying" when Vivian states, "If we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture, the work produced under this influence is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date" (155). Therefore, the self and its development through contemplation and contemplation's deliberate self-consciousness are essential elements for producing quality and enduring aesthetic work.

The term aesthetic work is important in considering how Wilde's contemplative ideal opposes and even challenges that of the Victorian Utilitarian/Evangelical ideal. If Wilde is advocating work, then that would be a goal similar to that of the official rulers of Victorian society. Yet it is the definition and category of work that is crucial in differentiating between the two. Wilde's ideal of work has the goal of further self-cultivation, if it has any goal at all. His characters repeatedly engage in activities that are largely contemplative and whose fruits will be not a better society or a larger bank account but the broadening of their sensuous and aesthetic experience. For example, in The Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde flippantly and directly addresses this issue with Algernon's statement, "It is awful hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind" (271). Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism demand a working self whose ultimate goals are tangible and useful and which are beneficial to a large number of people. They also "speak in similar language" (Newsome 58), a language that is radically
different from the type Wilde employs. Wilde’s working self avoids this language of results and usefulness and instead prefers the activity of self-cultivation, which is only fully achieved through contemplation.

As Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism grew in popularity in England, according to Altick they “joined to create and rationalize what came to be known as middle-class values” (165). Currently, Wilde is infamous for what has been construed as his furious war on Victorian values, yet Gopnik claims that Wilde “loved bourgeois respectability so much that he went to court to defend it” (80). Gopnik further asserts that “genuine radicals like Shaw and Harris [judged Wilde] ‘A snob, both by nature and training’” (84). Here then is a possible tension and perhaps even contradiction between Wilde’s philosophic and aesthetic stance of *theoria* and what Gopnik claims to be “an excessive concern for appearances and an acceptance of the relationship between hypocrisy and social order” (84). How can one be contemplative if one is obsessed with conforming to the reigning societal order of the time? And perhaps more importantly, how does this tension affect and shape one’s notion of the contemplative self?

One response is that no self, even an artificially constructed self, can completely rise above its milieu. This is a fundamental idea in postmodern theory. The Foucauldian view that no interpreter ever completely escapes his or her paradigm, and is therefore conditioned by it, is fiercely evident in the Wildean ethos. Secondly, Wilde never really had the time (or inclination, given his love of misinterpretation) to solidify and reconcile his philosophic, artistic, and personal assertions and activities.

Consequently, Wilde’s writing and life reflect this tension of a simultaneous attraction to Aristotelian contemplation and to the comfort and security of Victorian approval and material excess. In Wilde’s writing, it is clear that he dismantles the ethos of Victorian industry for comedy’s sake, that this technique is not just “sweetener” (Gopnik 78), but perhaps even the main goal of
Wilde’s literary endeavors. For example, in “The Critic as Artist” Gilbert claims, “Learned conversation is either the affection of the ignorant or the profession of the mentally unemployed” (551); in “The Decay of Lying” Vivian asserts, “If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again there is no use reading it at all” (154); in The Importance of Being Earnest Algernon complains, “[I]t isn’t easy to be anything nowadays. There’s such a lot of beastly competition about” (260); and in The Picture of Dorian Gray Lord Henry states, “Philanthropic people lose all sense of humanity” (26). All these statements are funny, exaggerated, and easily accessible to a middle-class audience. They appear to be in the texts more for a laugh than for asserting a complex philosophic statement. Yet they all do hint at the privileging of contemplation over action, of aesthetic self-cultivation over improving oneself for merely practical purposes or improving the material lives of others. It seems unlikely that if Wilde were merely concerned with laughs his jokes would be so unified in theme.

The persistence of this theme is explained in part by Wilde’s time at Oxford. Wilde attended Oxford during a time that was heavily influenced by an intense period of change earlier in the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, Oxford witnessed the Romantic influence, scientific positivism, evolutionary theory, the decline of religion, and the controversial Oxford Movement within the Church of England. Three important figures that addressed some of these issues were John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Pater. These men may at first appear unconnected; however, in Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England David DeLaura posits that the “inwardness” that Newman insists on as man’s essential spiritual quality is secularized as part of Arnold’s criticism and culture and emerges finally as Pater’s “impassioned contemplation.” (xi)

DeLaura uses these influential scholarly figures to connect and illuminate the
disruptive tension between the moral faculty (Christian) and the intellectual faculty (Greek) in Victorian culture. Newman, Arnold, and Pater all end up leaning toward Aristotle's *theoria* as a response to this tension. And, as a good Oxford student, Wilde carries on this philosophic and literary tradition in his work though (if Gopnik is correct) it may not be the primary objective of the work. Yet there is a significant amount of genuine theorizing in Wilde's works, especially in his essays. In a complaint against the vulgarity and practical nature of Victorian society, Gilbert states in "The Critic as Artist," somewhat bitterly, "Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer. The beautiful sterile emotions that art excites in us are hateful in its eyes" (576). However much Wilde enjoyed the material luxury of middle class respectability and the popular success of his entertainment, he also advocates and reveals his own academic influences and personal aesthetics in his work. And his aesthetic sensibility compelled him to react against the powerful forces of Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism in Victorian England with the contemplative ideal as an essential element for constructing the self.

**Aesthetic Historicism**

Wilde's ideal of *theoria* for the constructed self also manifests itself through another aspect of his writing. This is yet another legacy that he carries from Oxford which is linked to his specific ethos—the concept of aesthetic historicism. Once again the three primary figures central to the construction and shaping of this intellectual ideal for Wilde were John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Pater. Not only were these men interested in joining the ancient world to Victorian Christian sensibility, but they were also especially interested in preserving the aesthetic European heritage as England grew increasingly imperial, industrial, and secular. DeLaura claims that despite their differences, these men all worked to reclaim or save this heritage from the likes of "T. H.
Huxley and company” and that it was imperative to them that the “European past—mind, imagination, devotion—was to be somehow preserved for the future, apart from belief, through refinement of taste and the pursuit of a self-regarding ‘culture’” (343).

Wilde continues this very non-utilitarian endeavor. It is an endeavor that is located within the self, an endeavor that requires contemplation for the deliberate artificial construction of an historical self-consciousness that preserves and synthesis the original and beautiful in Western civilization.

Wilde’s devotion to this ideal of aesthetic historicism is realized primarily in his devotion to the role of critic/artist, as seen in “The Critic as Artist.” According to Fang,

Wilde defines the ideal critic/artist as someone who culminates in him-/herself the evolutionary development in the realm of thought, and experiences mentally, as it were, all the achievements that have already taken place in the history of human civilization.

(25)

This artistic, self-conscious culmination is for Wilde one of the means to pleasure and happiness in life for the contemplative self. That is why criticism, an art form Wilde traces back to the Greeks, is given such an elevated status. For it is only with the use of both the critical faculty and the artistic faculty that the self can fully contemplate the undeniable Platonic “connection between Beauty and Truth” (“Critic” 554).

Wilde’s primary areas of historical interest for the development of an historical aestheticism for the self are the Romantic and the Hellenic. Wilde continues and elaborates these movements with the elevation of the self and its harmony above all else. For example, in “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert claims that the critic is so very valuable because his “sole aim is to chronicle his own impressions” (564), and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Lord Henry’s moral vision
rests on the premise that "[t]o be good is to be in harmony with one's self" (57).

Additionally, Wilde continues and elaborates the Hellenic tradition of equating pleasure and happiness with ethics and morality. For example in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Cecily reassures Algernon, "Well, I know, of course, how important it is not to keep a business engagement if one wants to retain any sense of the beauty in life" (278). In "The Decay of Lying," Hellenic pleasure and happiness are two of Wilde's primary motivators in lamenting "the decay of lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure." He longs for the times when "ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact" unlike "the modern novelist [who] presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction" (148).

Wilde's ultimate goal in utilizing and constructing a self that possesses a refined sense of aesthetic historicism is to facilitate, as Vivian states in "The Decay of Lying," an existence that keeps life "at a respectful distance" (153). If the self is contemplative and is primarily concerned with harmonizing the aesthetic achievements of Western civilization, then that self follows Lord Henry's advice in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "One should absorb the colour of life, but one should never remember its details. Details are always vulgar" (74). Aesthetic historicism is not about storing and memorizing "a mess of facts" ("Decay of Lying" 154), because that goal produces the mind and self that Lord Henry criticizes. He claims that "the mind of the thoroughly well-informed man is a dreadful thing. It is like a bric-a-brac shop, all monsters and dust, with everything priced above its proper value" (9). The self that a well-developed sense of aesthetic historicism produces, however, is contemplative and eventually becomes greater than any single artistic creation. This is what Gilbert is driving at in "The Critic as Artist" when he asserts that "creation limits, while contemplation widens, the vision" (592). Here again the Romantic emphasis upon the self surfaces, along with Paterian subjectivism.
Yet Wilde's aesthetic historicism is not merely combining one era with another. His vision is grounded in the selection and refinement of the best of each chosen era, and this contemplative process lies primarily with the imaginative faculty. According to Fang, this is where Wilde becomes strikingly Freudian, though Wilde never had the opportunity to read Freud before his death (119). In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse’s Freudian reading of Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education* rings close to the Wildean ethos. Marcuse reads Schiller’s ideal aesthetics as inextricably tied to the function of the imagination. According to Marcuse, Schiller asserts in this work that once imagination

> has really gained ascendency as a principle of civilization, the play impulse would literally transform the reality. Nature, the objective world, would then be experienced primarily, neither as dominating man (as in the primitive society), nor as being dominated by man (as in the established civilization), but rather as an object of “contemplation.” (173)

This claim elevates the self, elevates the primacy of pleasure over duty, and reasserts Aristotle’s *theoria* as the primary function of man, all through an historical perspective of the imagination. Wilde follows a similar pattern in his work. Dorian willfully desires to dominate nature. At one point before his decision to live a life that fully experiences the aesthetic and the sensuous he says, “I don’t want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them” (79). This statement foreshadows Dorian’s demise because he does not give necessary credit and attention to the contemplative imagination, as Lord Henry does. Lord Henry claims, “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul” (15). Lord Henry’s statement is a balanced one, a view more in agreement with that of the narrator.
The role of the narrator is important to the novel. Although narration is sparse in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the voice is strong. Especially does the narrator's voice come through as Dorian sinks deeper and deeper into his purely sensual life. The narrator states, "Actual life was chaos, but there was something terribly logical in the imagination" (151). With this narration Wilde removes blame from the imaginative faculty, a faculty he viewed as redeeming, and places it on the life lived without imagination.

Dorian's destruction does not come solely from his love of the sensual and pleasurable. According to Ed Cohen, the tragedy springs from the fact that "Dorian comes to view his body as distinct from his soul" (80). Therefore the novel, and perhaps Wilde's own life, can be read as an experiment in what occurs when an individual possesses a distorted conception of aesthetic historicism, an aesthetic historicism that ignores key elements such as contemplation and imagination as agents in synthesizing the best of Western self-culture.

Watching

Another aspect of Wilde's *theoria* is directly related to homosexuality and the public manifestation of homosexuality in Victorian England. This aspect is Wilde's emphasis on watching as both a contemplative and a sexual act. Richard Dellamora claims that Wilde's "trials touched the very center of the establishment" (194). The sexual assault trial of Wilde's father's, Sir William Wilde, in Dublin in 1864, blew over without much more than a fine and a slap on the wrist; however, Wilde's own charge of sexual indecency, perhaps because it involved males instead of a female, played a significant part in the transition in the societal understanding of sexual orientation. Indeed, for a considerable time after his trials, Wilde was known more for his crime and conviction of homosexual activity than for his work.
Recently there has been more attention paid to what Ian Small terms the “Gay Wilde” (*Recent* 39). This attention does not merely concentrate on the sordid details concerning Wilde’s numerous sexual encounters with teenage male prostitutes or his bizarre paternal relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. It concentrates on showing how Wilde’s sexual orientation inspired his work, and more specifically for this thesis, how his homosexuality manifests itself in his notion of the self.

Analyzing what is known or suspected about Wilde’s homosexuality is becoming increasingly necessary to understanding his work. One of the reasons for this necessity is that Wilde was so radically out of the closet, both by choice and by force of the court, in a way that other writers of the time wisely refused to be. Wilde’s natural conceit and love for the dramatic instigated his teasing the English with his sexual life. Small cites Gary Schmidgall’s *The Stranger Wilde* as an important study in how Wilde’s homosexuality is an important piece of his overall ethos. According to Small, this book aptly demonstrates how “Wilde was firmly out of sympathy with his ‘closeted’ gay contemporaries, particularly James and Pater” (*Recent* 18). This is where many critics seize the opportunity to label Wilde a gay martyr, and most commonly cited in this labeling is Richard Ellmann. However, some critics see this as a faulty analysis because, as Gagnier states in “Sexuality, the Public, and the Art World,” Wilde “lived before a time when sexual preference had become an identity” (24). Though, as Gagnier states further in the same essay, “Wilde did not, properly speaking, enjoy a gay identity” (24), his homosexuality does play an important role in his idea of the construction of the self. Wilde’s intermingling of sexual orientation and philosophical musings is related to a larger societal current. Gagnier states that “[m]any homosexual men of the time were so accustomed to frustration […] that they habitually valued contemplation above activity, which was often associated with sex with a woman” (42). Though Wilde was far from sexually
frustrated, the contemplative and quasi-sexual act of watching becomes both a symbolic emblem of solidarity with the homosexual community and a way to speak to his homosexual audience in code, as well as keeping with his overall theme of theoria.

The primacy of watching is played out most overtly in The Picture of Dorian Gray, the novel that contributed to Wilde’s own downfall when its homoerotic language was used as evidence in court. The act of watching runs as a homosexual metaphor throughout the entire book.

In the novel, Dorian is the primary watchee. Both Basil and Lord Henry are fascinated with the physical image of him. For example, Lord Henry feels “intensely interested” (14) upon meeting Dorian the first time and watches him throughout his fateful portrait sitting with Basil. Basil is at first reluctant to part with Dorian’s portrait (2-3). According to Cohen, “Dorian is an image—a space of the constitution of male desire,” and “the novel constructs Dorian as a template of desire” (76). Dorian then replaces the traditional female figure as an object of male desire, even though the desire is translated into artistic terms. For example, Basil’s attraction to Dorian is coded in this artistic and philosophic description to Lord Henry:

The merely visible presence of this lad [...] I wonder can you realize all that that means? Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body [...] (8)

Dorian is also the watcher. He watches himself by gazing at his portrait with sensual affectation. This is why so many critics, such as Antonio Ballesteros Gonzalez, point to the Narcissus theme in the novel. Gonzalez points out that “Dorian is identified with Narcissus by Lord Henry” at the beginning (4). Because Dorian falls in love with his own image later on, he is able to assume
that physical representation and then watch, with a disturbing relish, his portrait turn into a monster. Riquelme asserts a similar position. He claims that Wilde “constructs his narrative around a myth, that of Echo and Narcissus” and that this technique “provides an early example of what T. S. Eliot called ‘the mythic method,’ a defining element of modernism” (617).

In his only experience of loving another person, Dorian is seduced by the act of watching. He becomes infatuated with Sibyl Vane through the act of watching, and when the aesthetic and sexual experience of watching is dismantled by Sibyl’s genuine reciprocation, Dorian’s love for her is gone. Through his attraction to her, Dorian requires Sibyl then to take on the role of watchee, the role that he held for Basil and Henry.

Interestingly, Sibyl’s gender is somewhat ambiguous in the text. Dorian’s first reaction to her--“[t]here is something of a child about her” (39)--stands out in the narrative. Sibyl is always referred to as a girl, thereby eliminating the body of a sexually mature woman. Also, her voice is described as low by Dorian, and he says to Lord Henry, “Your voice and the voice of Sibyl Vane are two things I shall never forget” (37). Given her classic male profession of actor, her childlikeness, and the striking lack of physicality between her and Dorian, it is not too far a leap to see this openly heterosexual relationship as a covert symbol for a subversive homosexual relationship. The demise of this relationship facilitates Dorian’s decision to eschew watching in favor of a more intense sensation, and to begin his descent into a life that is socially and publicly unacceptable.

Given that watching is the only acceptable public display of homosexual love, fantasy is integral to sustaining this hands-off relationship. While Dorian is falling in love with Sibyl, his infatuation is motivated by her ability to create fantasy for him. This is Dorian’s defense to Lord Henry for loving her. Dorian asserts:
She is everything to me in life. Night after night I go see her play. One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. I have seen her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb, sucking the poison from her lover's lips. I have watched her wandering through the forests of Arden, disguised as a pretty boy in hose [...]. Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination.

When she ceases to create this fantasy, Dorian is unable to love her. Lord Henry dismisses the tragedy with the comment, "The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away" (75). Lord Henry, then, upholds the status quo homosexual relationship—one that is contemplative, engages only in watching and fantasy, and never dares enter "life." Dorian is unsatisfied by this experience and dives into the socially enforced seediness that marks active homosexual relationships. When a relationship, especially a sexual one, is not allowed to be public, then that relationship absorbs the condemnation of the society that condemns it, and consequently, it is pushed into a sub-culture and is highly susceptible to vulgarity. Once the homosexual self is removed from the sphere of the contemplative imagination, it is trapped in a hegemonically, and in Wilde's day legally, determined unacceptability which, in Wilde's novel and in his life, eventually leads to death.

In "Eros and Thanatos in The Picture of Dorian Gray," Sylvia Ostermann examines Wilde's fascination with the connection between physical love and death. She claims that Wilde "always combines beauty with decay, joy with suffering [...] the close relation of eros and death" (298). According to Ostermann, Wilde's interweaving of these elements is close to "what Sigmund Freud later describes in terms of impulse of life and impulse of death, Eros and Thanatos" (299). Wilde specifically uses these universal human elements and constructs them as two parts of the homosexual self. This construction of Wilde's
is part of what Gopnik describes as his desire to “have his cake, eat it, franchise a bakery chain with his name on it, defend the cause of pure pastry, and somehow get credit for both abstinence and epicureanism” (80). Wilde is able to create and to express the practice of an active homosexual lifestyle and then also to redeem himself and the novel socially through the deathly poisonous effect of that lifestyle.

For instance, every character that comes into close, intimate contact with Dorian suffers or dies, every character except, of course, Lord Henry. Though Lord Henry leads Dorian down the wayward path, he survives and thrives in the dandiacal lifestyle because he remains within the domain of publicly sanctioned homosexuality. He watches, he contemplates, and he cultivates a balanced sense of aesthetic historicism. While his entire existence defies English society, it does so in a way that is pleasing, entertaining, and nonthreatening. Also, Lord Henry has by far the most lines in the novel and is the most detached observer. Dorian, however, is the character who fully experiences the aesthetic. If the reader considers that Dorian’s experience implies the achievement of the ultimate aestheticism and that his activities are so mysterious, it is possible for him or her to hypothesize that the term aesthetic is, among other things, a Wildean covert word for an active homosexuality. Dorian and Lord Henry almost seem to be two parts of an ideal, fantastical self for Wilde.

So then why would he kill off part of the fantasy? Fang claims, “Wilde was equally captivated by sin and masochistic self-castigation and atonement” (107). The tension between the characterization of Lord Henry and Dorian exhibits Wilde’s own divided self. While he was attracted to and advocated the long-standing tradition of contemplation within intellectual and academic history, he also obviously was not entirely satisfied with that experience, specifically with a sexual experience that was only allowed to exist in the non-physical realm, the realm of watching. Thus, while Wilde recklessly participated
in a sinful lifestyle, he also fulfilled his desire for atonement by writing the painful downfall of his own decadent creation, Dorian.

Not surprisingly, the Wildean ethos is, at its heart, contradictory. The ideals that this ethos projects are at times in conflict with each other. Perhaps this is because there is not a clear aim in Wilde's conception of the self. If Wilde viewed the self as divided into at least two parts, then the ethos that this self projects is by necessity riddled with contradiction. Certainly *theoria* is elemental to constructing a self that rejects the self-shallow work of Victorian society; however, that historical position of *theoria* also conflicts with Wilde's fantasy of the ideal aesthetic of an active homosexual lifestyle.
valued aspects of the self with new Wildean values for the self. Dollimore claims that in Wilde’s work “the attributes on the left are substituted for those on the right” (57). His list follows:

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One of Wilde’s primary strategies for these substitutions is his exaggeration and advocacy of personalities.

**Personalities**

Wilde’s emphasis on personality in the aesthetic construction of the self at times rejects his Arnoldian heritage of disinterestedness, which was picked up later by T.S. Eliot, most notably in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in 1920. In his article “Wilde’s Dark Angel and the Spell of Decadent Catholicism,” Roland Schuchard posits that “Eliot was both a student and a teacher of Wilde’s works” (383). However, in terms of the personality’s role in the artistic process, Eliot sticks much closer to Arnold than Wilde ever did. Eliot’s very Arnoldian view is that the artistic process is ideally “a continual extinction of personality” (Eliot 2398).

Juxtaposing Eliot’s claim with Gilbert’s claim in “The Critic as Artist” that
“art springs from personality, so it is only to personality that it can be revealed, and from the meeting of the two comes right interpretative criticism” (571), a reader clearly sees that Wilde is favoring his Paterian influence. Wilde favors personality as inspiration for art, as well as perhaps the highest art form itself. Danson claims that Wilde borrowed heavily from Pater who, “installs personality both as the receptor of those impressions that are all we know of life, and as the impression above all others that is is our privilege to receive” (“Impermanence” 84). Though Wilde stresses the role of personality in artistic creation, he rejects the notion that the self possesses one true personality which can be analyzed by biographers.

Wilde held some rather harsh views concerning the quest for personality, especially when the quest is carried out in the form of biography. Gilbert labels biographers the “body-snatchers of literature” (546). This mutilation is what Basil fears might occur by showing Dorian’s portrait. In defense for not showing his best work, Basil argues:

An Artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. (25)

Here, Basil echoes Arnold and foreshadows Eliot by de-emphasizing the artist’s personality in the artistic process.

According to Danson, Basil’s fear of personality critique is not only grounded in an artistic philosophy, but it also grows out of the fact that Dorian’s portrait reflects Basil’s recognition of his own homosexuality. Danson claims that Basil’s immediate attraction to Dorian’s “personality” and subsequent desire to paint him arise from the fact that “the fine or responsive personality is sexually sympathique” in Wildean work (“Impermanence” 88). Personality, then, becomes a means by which homosexuals in Victorian culture communicate covertly, while
still being able to utilize more acceptable masks and poses overtly. Therefore, it is a necessity for a homosexual, such as Wilde, to emphasize the use of personalities in the construction of the self. This emphasis makes the disguised self distinguishable to chosen Others. Danson sheds light on this concept with his explanation of the contrast in personality between homosexual and heterosexual. He states:

"Unlike the personality of Victorian heterosexual earnestness—the personality defined by shallow psychology as 'simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence'—the personality Dorian discovers is complex, impermanent, unreliable, non-essential. ("Impermanence" 91)"

How then does this tension between art and personality resolve itself for Wilde? One answer is that Wilde is merely being dialogic, that his aim is not the insistent pursuit of one pure thesis, and therefore that there is no significant tension. Given that the works in this thesis are all, to some degree, in the form of dialogue, this easy answer appears very plausible. Yet since this issue of personality is so prevalent in Wilde's work, it is difficult for a close reader simply to disregard the possibility of any purposeful intent on Wilde's part. Wilde certainly acknowledges the force and importance of personality for art; however, he also certainly rejects the notion that a personality is singular and that it can be explained, examined, or proven. This two-part discussion of Wilde's use of personality illuminates more clearly his ability to multiply personalities for his characters and himself through masks and poses.

These personalities of Wilde's artistic creations assume numerous masks and poses. In fact, Danson asserts that "The Decay of Lying" is in its entirety a "valorization of surfaces and masks over the common-sense notion of sincerity" (Intentions 39). For if one possesses "a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling" ("Decay" 149), then it is impossible to assume masks and poses as a
means for artificially constructing a variety of personalities. Herein lies Vivian's assertion that Life reflects Art. If a self is made up of personalities that are expressed through masks and poses, then Art serves as a better reality, rather than Life, for the self. Wilde continued to assert this position even after his downfall. In 1897 from Reading Gaol, Wilde wrote, "I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction" (Murray vi).

Also within "The Decay of Lying" Vivian states that "the object of Art is not simple truth but complex beauty" (156), and if certain individuals have already whittled down Life to simple truth, then the only other option of reality for the Wildean self is Art. Only when the self accepts "that Life is in fact the mirror, and Art the reality" (160) does that self flourish in its assumed masks and poses which express its various personalities.

Wilde's emphasis on personalities expressed through masks and poses is most aptly demonstrated by examining his character development, or more specifically his lack of character development. Even in his novel, Wildean characters are not exposed to the reader in any significant way. Rather, the reader is presented with a glittering display of personalities that is suspiciously unfruitful for this reader's getting to know the characters, especially because of their reliance on masks and poses. Wilde's emphasis on personalities is also demonstrated in the essays in this thesis. They are both dependent on the personality of the prophetic character, a character who works to disarm the reader through his personality, which is a mask for Wilde the creator. In The Importance of Being Earnest, the reader is again forcefully kept at a distance by the strength and superficiality of the characters' personalities. Consequently, through their emphasis on personality, the works themselves become masks and poses for Wilde the writer.
Paradoxes

One of the primary aids in sustaining Wildean masks and poses is through the conversational technique of paradoxical epigrams and aphorisms. Wilde is sometimes accused of or praised for being a conversationalist rather than a writer. According to Maria Pulido, this Wildean trait began in the writer's childhood. She asserts that it was in Lady Wilde's salons that Oscar developed his conversational skills and where he was granted a heaven-sent opportunity to master the paradoxes and epigrams which made him an assidu to the most important drawing rooms of the time. (323)

Moreover, in connecting Wilde's paradoxical technique to his personal experience, Gagnier asserts that "Wilde's position as a practicing homosexual leading a 'double life' in society contributed to the peculiar form of witty paradoxes in the pre-prison work" ("Sexuality" 28). These two critics cite the powerful influences of nurture and sexual orientation to partially pinpoint and explain what is perhaps Wilde's most popular literary element, the paradox.

In examining Wilde's work from an anti-postmodern perspective, Gopnik claims that Wilde is "a writer who is essentially a talker, and who somehow needs to have the urgency of talking imposed on his writing" (81). Gopnik further asserts that it was Wilde's talk where his "real genius emerged" (81). Not surprisingly, most of Wilde's work is in dialogic form, and certainly, Wilde is one of the most quotable writers ever because of this conversational/journalistic style and tone of his writing. Also, the outrageous nature of Wildean epigrams and aphorisms contribute to their quotability as well as further mystifying a "true" personality in favor of constructed masks and poses as ideal means to express the self, or personalities of the self.

Critics tend to agree that Wilde's use of paradoxical epigrams and
aphorisms was perfected in his creation of *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Aside from the artistic gloss of Wilde’s final societal drama, Fang claims, “In *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Wilde shows that the self is a fiction and can be reinvented endlessly” (178). The constant and, at times, seemingly disorderly paradoxical nature of the conversation in the play is the primary agent for advancing Wilde’s *self as fiction* theme.

For example, when Algernon first finds out about the fiction of Jack’s Ernest he is delighted to know that Jack is as much a Bumburyist as he is, and when Jack claims he will kill off Ernest once he and Gwendolen are engaged, Algernon is dismayed and cautions, “You don’t seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none” (260). Wilde comfortably takes a stab at the sacred nature of marriage for comedy’s sake and also upholds the ideal construction of the self, in that the self is multiple and one needs multiple masks and poses to sustain and nurture this multiple self. By being paradoxical regarding the nature of traditional Western notions of marriage, Wilde is able to address the conversational needs of the play at the same time that he addresses the thematic ones.

Lady Bracknell is perhaps the most exaggerated example of Wilde’s paradoxical use of aphorisms and epigrams. Her personality is almost entirely expressed through this technique and the technique is undoubtedly highlighted the most in her character. Some of her lines include: “I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone” (266); “Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids” (262); “To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution” (268). Lady Bracknell’s function in the play is primarily to deliver these paradoxical lines that have little bearing on the action of this
society drama. The lovers continue their activities regardless of her objections and are only subject to her whims when she is in the room and delivering her lines.

These lines create a pose for Lady Bracknell that is formidable, unrelenting, and comic. Her pose then is the importance of her role in the action and this pose is only effective when she is in the room. Her character does not drive or motivate the other characters when absent. Lady Bracknell’s role is only important as a deliverer of paradoxical epigrams and aphorisms which shape her as an assumed pose, rather than developing traditionally through action and interior thoughts.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the masks and poses of the characters are also sustained largely by the Wildean technique of conversational, paradoxical epigrams and aphorisms. According to Michael Gillespie, this technique is a key to understanding the ethical underpinnings of the novel because it challenges the reader to construct “an interpretive analysis of the moral postures of various individuals” (137). For instance, Lord Henry’s voice is the most paradoxical, the most conversational, and it is also the most assertive in advancing an ethical position embedded in an aesthetic philosophy. Much like Lady Bracknell, his character is not developed traditionally through action or interior thoughts, yet his masks and poses are by far the most polished in the novel and they serve as testimonies to his aesthetic and ethical stance. In Lord Henry and Basil’s philosophic conversation before Dorian and Lord Henry’s initial meeting, Lord Henry defends his outrageous statements with the response, “the value of an idea has nothing to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it” (7). Lord Henry simultaneously defends his own construction of the self and advances an ethical position for the entire novel through this phrase which is paradoxical to conventional standards. With this response, Lord Henry’s self is sufficiently separated from his conversation and likewise the novel is separated from the
conversations of the characters. By disowning the sincerity of conversation, the self is liberated and, consequently, more brilliant and entertaining. Character development thus once again becomes obsolete in another Wildean text, and it is the display of mask and pose in conversation that drives the separated ethical and aesthetic philosophies of the work.

Wilde’s insistence that his characters are more a combination of mask and pose rather than traditionally developed is evidenced in their continual use of paradoxical phrases. Some readers of Wilde grow weary of this technique, yet its use reenforces Ellmann’s assertion that Wilde believed “the world wore a mask” (Oscar Wilde 379). A world that wears a mask can only be portrayed by people who do the same. Wilde’s point is especially emphasized by the paradoxical nature of the characters’ speeches.

The perpetual use of this paradoxical technique similarly validates Vivian’s statement in “The Decay of Lying” that “[t]he only real people are the people who never existed” (151). If the ideal self is constructed of assumed masks and poses that are asserted by its use of paradoxical epigrams and aphorisms, then this self is best expressed in a fictional context, in the context of literature.

“-The Critic as Artist” asserts that masks and poses that are expressed through paradoxical epigrams and aphorisms are necessary for the ideal self, which holds for its end the goal of self-cultivation through the critical faculty. Once again, the dominant voice, Gilbert’s, is the most paradoxical voice. In fact, the weaker, more rational voice of Ernest is kept in a state of confusion throughout the essay as a result of Gilbert’s oratorical style. Finally, at the end of the essay, Ernest is forced to clarify and summarize what he thinks he has heard his friend declare (596). This clarification and summarization turns out to be a host of paradoxes that elevate masks and poses as ideals for the critical self. For example, Gilbert states, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth” (583). Fang claims that
it is this “conscious advocacy of duplicity which fascinates Wilde” (179). Rather than any sort of “truth” springing from man’s usual mask (his own person), more “truth” is uncovered and revealed by man’s assuming new masks and new poses, ones that give freedom rather than restriction. The Wildean theory of mask and pose is similar to Mikhail Bakhtin’s “carnivalization” in that they both lift the restrictions of civilization and free the self to multiply and express or, according to J.A. Cuddon, they allow the “incorporation of carnival into everyday life, and its shaping effect on language and literature” (111).

Subjectivism

Wilde’s subjectivism is best expressed through his development of masks and poses for the self. Masks and poses hinder the quest for a single, fixed truth because they facilitate “the subject exert[ing] its sovereign command over external reality” and strengthen the right of the subject to construct “the objective world according to its own needs and desires” (Fang 228). Art expressed through masks and poses, then, becomes an ideal subjective reality for demonstrating the duplicity of truth, which mirrors the duplicity of the self. Wilde once claimed, “[I]n art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (qtd. in Raby 3).

Wilde’s exploration of the subjective nature of truth is illuminated most clearly and strongly in “The Critic as Artist,” through the mask of Gilbert. Throughout the piece, Gilbert asserts the importance of the critic’s function as the preventive agent of art’s fated banality. The critic accomplishes this by always viewing art as a suggestion and a challenge (563). Wilde here gives direct homage to his mentor Walter Pater, specifically to Pater’s famous critique of the Mona Lisa. Gilbert enthusiastically defends this subjective critical approach. He claims, “To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticizes” (567).
Gilbert takes subjectivism a further step by later asserting a more concrete position that the ideal aesthetic critic holds "all interpretations true and no interpretation final" (568) and that "all artistic creation is absolutely subjective" (582).

Though he lambasts traditional Victorian notions of truth, Wilde's examination of truth through the mask of Gilbert certainly does not approach a nihilist philosophy. Claiming that reality is ideally expressed in art through mask and pose, that the self is both multiple and paradoxical, and that reality is subjective does not render truth obsolete. Rather the critical spirit harmonizes truth with these aesthetic elements. Gilbert claims:

It is Criticism that, recognizing no position as final, and refusing to bind itself by the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school, creates that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake, and loves it not the less because it knows it to be unattainable.

(595)

"The Decay of Lying" advocates a similar position. Vivian not only implies the unattainability of truth, he also belittles the quest for it in literature. Vivian's major complaint of this ill-guided quest is its ugly worship of facts, as if facts are the key to truth, when it is beauty that is the key. Vivian believes that facts destroy beauty, and in his argument he specifically targets the hyperphilistinism of American culture. He claims that

[f]acts are not merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping the domain of Fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of Romance. Their chilling touch is over everything. They are vulgarizing mankind. The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a
man, who according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie [...]. (158)

When the artist abandons facts in favor of lying, then truth becomes "entirely and absolutely a matter of style" (159). Good literature, literature that delights and entertains, is only possible through a rejection of mere facts and an acceptance of constructed, subjective reality. This ideal reality is constructed through the mask and pose (lie) of the creator and eventually arrives closer to the truth than any other method.

Because ideal truth, which for Wilde is similar to ideal beauty, becomes more valuable for its unattainability, then the aesthete is given a liberal rein in the construction of his self, and consequently, the construction of his reality. For instance, Dorian constructs his own decadent, aesthetic reality through masks and poses which become real enough eventually to destroy him. The novel is one of the primary mediums where Wilde asserts man's "right to create reality out of [his] imagination" (Fang 18). After Sibyl's death, Dorian increasingly creates his own subjective reality to larger and larger degrees. It is a reality that becomes devoid of anything except the senses and is rationalized by Dorian's subjective approach to another constructed reality, that of Victorian society.

Toward the end of the novel, the narrator remarks that Dorian "grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul" (103). Dorian's subjective reality, built upon the influence of Lord Henry's powerful example of mask and pose, becomes exaggerated and turns in upon itself. Instead of interpreting Dorian's deathly subjectivism as proof of the failure and folly of Wilde's subjectivism, one should remember Gilbert's statement that "An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all" (581). Wilde is unhindered in experimenting with the extreme limits of his own ethical and aesthetic philosophies, even if it means demonstrating their destructive, fallible, and dangerous nature. Their
explosiveness is why he asserts such ideas in the first place. Furthermore, with this intertextual tension, readers are prevented from assuming which ideas are Wilde’s and which are not, that is if Lord Henry’s statement is taken to heart concerning the sincerity of the speaker versus the value of the idea (7).

Additionally, the subjective context of the novel serves as a darkly sensuous backdrop for a book immersed in the tradition of the nineteenth century French Decadent Movement. After Dorian murders Basil and while he waits for the friend who will help him cover up the crime, he descends deeper into his own horrible subjective reality. The narrator describes Dorian’s experience this way:

The brain had its own food on which it batten, and the imagination, made grotesque by terror, twisted and distorted as a living thing by pain, danced like some foul puppet on a stand, and grinned through moving masks. (122)

Dorian’s reality has become so subjective that it is virtually a nightmare.

In the final chapters of the novel, Dorian’s destruction is foreshadowed by his inability to sustain the nightmare he has created through constructing a subjective reality and a self that are only perceptible through the mask of youth. After first realizing that Sibyl’s vengeful brother, James Vane, is following him, Dorian begins to reflect on the stark consequences of constructing his subjective reality. He asks himself, “What sort of life would his be, if day and night, shadows of his crime were to peer at him from silent corners, to mock him from secret places […] to wake him with icy fingers” (147). In experimenting with Lord Henry’s model of assumed mask and pose that create an ideal subjective and aesthetic existence, Dorian never imagined the dangers such a philosophy could produce when exaggerated and distorted by the rejection of the soul.

Strangely, Wilde’s literary exploration of creating a subjective reality through mask and pose in The Picture of Dorian Gray mirrors his own life and his
relationship with Douglas. It is especially strange because Wilde wrote and published the novel before ever meeting Douglas. A long, frustrated letter to Douglas from Wilde in prison in 1897 almost summarizes the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian, specifically the frightening aspects of Dorian’s temperament. Wilde wrote

you had no motives in life. You had appetites merely [. . .]. Your defect was not that you knew so little about life, but that you knew so much. The morning dawn of boyhood with its delicate bloom, its clear pure light, its joy of innocence and expectation you had left far behind [. . .]. The gutter and the things that live in it had begun to fascinate you [. . .]. The real fool, such as the gods mock or mar, is he who does not know himself. (The Complete Letters 684-685)

Wilde is undoubtedly expressing his maddening anger in this letter that his own subjective reality, sustained temporarily by mask and pose, was destroyed.

The multiplicity of masks and poses is elemental to Wildean work for varied reasons. They are primarily useful tools for the characters Wilde creates. For instance, masks and poses are appealing ways for the Wildean self to express its personalities. Also, masks and poses are sustained easily and entertainingly by the paradoxical epigrams and aphorisms of the characters’ language which seems to have come so quickly to Wilde. These masks and poses are also agents for the Wildean self to create his own subjective reality. Masks and poses are undeniably central to Wilde’s overall construction of the self.
CHAPTER IV
THE SOCIAL DANDY

As well as concentrating on how internal aspects of the self mold representation, Wilde is also intensely concerned with external aspects of self-representation. His primary vehicle for developing such a socially determined representation is the figure of the dandy. Mask and pose, of course, are elemental tools for the social dandy. Gagnier defines Wilde’s dandyism as exerting “male submissiveness and instability of identity—the direct antithesis of the gentleman’s ideals of manliness, solidity, certitude of self, and singleness of purpose” (“Sexuality” 26). The Wildean dandy is, therefore, like other Wildean representations of self, multi-essenced. His entire existence forces upon society a sense of instability concerning not only male identity, but also identity in the larger context of the human’s relationship to his/her environment. Mask and pose, then, are necessary for sustaining Wilde’s dandyism because they render this offensive social role acceptable if it is perceived as merely facetious.

Drawing from a rich history of European dandyism, Wilde constructs his dandiacal figure as a superior social figure. As noted earlier, the dandy had been a figure in society since the late eighteenth century, long before Wilde’s time. Yet Wilde elevates this marginal social role from expendable to absolutely essential. He does this by giving the dandiacal figure the dominant voice in many of his works, and certainly, that is the dominant voice for all the Wildean works examined in this thesis.

The external, social role of the dandy is strengthened by Wilde’s sense of determinism. The dandy’s perhaps somewhat questionable actions can be explained away by the overwhelming, decadent presence of deterministic forces.
In *De Profundis*, Wilde elaborates on this concept of determinism as it relates to his own life.

But, indeed, I need not go on further into more instances of the strange doom you [Douglas] seem to have brought me in all things big or little. It makes me feel sometimes as if you yourself had been merely a puppet worked by some secret and unseen hand to bring terrible events to a terrible issue. But puppets themselves have passions. They will bring a new plot into what they are presenting, and twist the ordered issue of vicissitude to suit some whim or appetite of their own. To be entirely free, and at the same time entirely dominated by law, is the eternal paradox of human life [...]. (569)

This dark determinism is part of the decadence that is the Wildean dandy’s suitable back-drop.

Decadence

Wilde’s dandiacal figure is assisted in both his creation and his successful existence by the decadent atmosphere of both his works and the London society that Wilde enjoyed so much. In fact, Wilde is generally perceived as the number one advocate of decadence, even though, as Fang points out, Baudelaire was the driving force for helping to “define literary dandyism” (144) in the primary source of decadence, the French Symbolist Movement. Another French Symbolist, Joris-Karl Huysmans, also greatly influenced the larger European decadent movement. According to Ellmann, Huysmans’ novel *A rebours* developed into a “Bible of decadence” (*a long the riverrun* 4), especially for writers in France and England. In fact, it is the model for the dangerous book that contributes to Dorian’s descent.

Fang also asserts that what the decadent movement valued in Baudelaire’s
work, the “primacy of sensation, taste for the bizarre and horrible, cultivation of the artificial, and abandonment of the self to melancholy and sensuality” (118), came to define decadence itself. This turn-of-the-century decadence, while advocating the primacy of art and the artistic experience, simultaneously elevates the self. For example, Gagnier posits that “[i]n The Painter of Modern Life (1863) Baudelaire also interpreted dandyism [. . .] as a ‘cult of self’ arising from the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality” (Introduction 4).

Following the example of Baudelaire and others, Wilde’s decadence expresses his opposition of “the subordination of the aesthetic to the ethical” (Fang 127). Consequently, as with Baudelaire, the self is central to this stance of opposition, and, with the dandy, the self becomes aesthetic and as Gagnier states, “a living protest against vulgarity” (Introduction 3).

To enact this protest, Wilde’s dandiacal figures reinterpret the popular “ethics” of their context and show them as falsely superior to the more ethical position of aestheticism. In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert demotes the traditional Victorian ethical values of self-denial and self-sacrifice:

Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of the mutilation of the savage, part of that old worship of pain which is so terrible a factor in the history of the world, and which even now makes its victims day by day, and has its altars in the land. (560)

Rather than extinguishing the passions and the impulses of the self, as ethics is usually defined, Gilbert calls for a release of the self. He calls for the self to be what society terms decadent and “unethical.”

Gilbert not only reinterprets the duty of the self, but also the meaning of decadence as well. If decadence is viewed as “bad,” then Gilbert questions the ethical value of popular good:

To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is
obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability. Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. (595)

Gilbert, then, sees the freeing of the self from harmful interpretations of ethics as essential for it actually to be ethical. These more genuine ethics are achieved largely through the process of expressing of the self's passions. Gilbert only accomplishes the delivery of this message through his dandiacal social role. The role guards against the possibility of outraging the "ethical" public because it occupies an established social function.

Similarly, in "The Decay of Lying," Vivian views decadent expression as the foundation for a truly ethical existence, and he traces this concept to the Greeks. Vivian claims "the basis of life--the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it--is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained" (161). If Art is the ideal medium for life, for the expression of the self, for the opportunity of an ethical existence, then decadence, which bows to the primacy of art, is the ideal social environment, and the dandy, a living art form, is the ideal social role.

In The Importance of Being Earnest Wilde takes the ideal social role of the dandy to its most absurd and decadent level. The figure of Algernon exists only within the context of decadence. His existence would be impossible otherwise. He is accepted into polite society, Aunt Augusta's approval being evidence of that, and his voice, though contrary to all that is polite, is the strongest. In fact, almost everyone in the play is at least materially and superficially decadent in his or her self-centered existence; however, Algernon is the only one who articulates this stance as purposeful and deliberate, the playwright thus making him the self-defined dandiacal figure of this societal drama.

Algernon seems to defend and strengthen his social position by his
articulation. Almost everyone else says one thing and does another, a good example being Gwendolen’s and Cecily’s little tea party. Yet Algernon always articulates his actions to at least one other character, thereby freeing his self to the impulses of desire and passion, whether they be for food, clothes, or Cecily. In Act 2 he claims, “My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree” (284), and his actions throughout the play validate this statement. This Wildean dandiacal figure is much less sinister and much more playful than in other works. Algernon’s playfulness is accomplished largely by his ingenious ability to simultaneously acknowledge and indulge in his hypocrisies and inconsistencies all the while maintaining his upper-middle-class respectability.

Wilde’s most obviously decadent work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is very much a imitation of French decadent novels and also reveals Wilde’s own contradictory experience with secular decadent aestheticism and decadent Catholicism. Once again the ideal dandiacal voice, Lord Henry’s, is dominant. He comments upon and belittles societal expectation and advocates the decadent and aesthetic position of beauty as truth and beauty as a means to ethics. He disregards conventional notions of good and states rather plainly that “[s]in is the only real colour-element in modern life” (36) and that “no civilized man ever regrets a pleasure, and no uncivilized man ever knows what a pleasure is” (57).

Despite the novel’s emphasis on aestheticism as an ideal, Ellmann asserts that the novel demonstrates that a “life of mere sensation is anarchic and self-destructive” (*a long the riverrun* 144). Even so, it is not Lord Henry’s life that demonstrates this, but Dorian’s. Though he becomes a rather sinister dandiacal figure, Dorian’s voice is weak, almost nonexistent in some sections of the novel. The narrator’s primary function is to relate the actions, thoughts, and perceptions of Dorian. As Dorian sinks deeper and deeper into his own destructive decadence and dandiacal role, the narrator tells the reader that
"[t]here were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful" (115). Because of this radicalism of decadence, Dorian approaches more of a Byronic figure, a figure that is an alien, mysterious, and gloomy spirit, superior in his passions and powers to the common run of humanity, whom he regards with disdain. He harbors the torturing memory of an enormous nameless guilt that drives him toward an inevitable doom. He is in his isolation absolutely self-reliant, pursuing his own ends according to his self-generated moral code against any opposition, human or supernatural. And he exerts an attraction to other characters that is more compelling because it involves their terror at his obliviousness to ordinary human concerns and values. (Abrams 552)

Because of his likeness to this definition of the Byronic figure, Dorian is eventually excluded from the polite society that so willingly welcomes Lord Henry.

According to Roland Schuchard, Wilde expresses his "fear of damnation that underlies an excess of sensual pleasure" (384) with the characterization of Dorian. In defense of his assertion of Wilde's religious leanings, Schuchard claims that "the encrusted portrait of Wilde as priest of paganism, apostle of aestheticism, host of homoeroticism and victim of Victorian culture has refused to accommodate the image of Wilde as spiritual voyager" (371). Schuchard posits that Wilde's Oxford experience was not the completely secular, decadent experience that is commonly supposed. Rather, Schuchard points to some influential Catholic friends and Wilde's own Catholic leanings during the time (372-373).

According to Schuchard, decadent Catholicism appealed to Wilde because it acknowledged the "closeness of sinner and saint," as did another of Wilde's
significant influences, the French Symbolists (379-380). Additionally, Ellmann’s *Oscar Wilde* explores the possibility that Lady Wilde secretly had Oscar baptized Catholic when he was around four or five. Wilde’s interaction with and attraction to Catholicism was an important aspect of his religious and ethical understanding. Schuchard further asserts that this influence never completely left Wilde, as is evidenced by both the themes in his work and his own deathbed conversion. Schuchard states that “as we rediscover Wilde in the 1990s, we should deny no longer the fact that beneath the glittering *carnaval* of the Happy Prince of Aesthetes was the *danse macbre* of the decadent Catholic” (392).

Though Wilde’s decadent dandy is certainly fraught with significant tensions, it is clear that this social figure whose existence implies instability of identity is essential to understanding Wilde’s cultivation and development of the multi-essenced self.

**Influence**

Wilde’s dandiacal figure is also an extremely influential figure. The power of the Wildean dandy’s influence is an additional way in which the dandy’s social role is elevated beyond its traditionally marginal status. Fang claims, “What fascinates Wilde [...] greatly is for a person to invoke the power of the arts in influencing or inspiring another individual” (112). In his own life, Wilde was profoundly affected and shaped by the intoxicating experience of influence. Danson observes that Wilde tributes Pater’s *The Renaissance* for creating a specific effect over his life. Wilde termed it a “strange influence” (qtd. in “Impermanence” 84). Additionally in his comparison essay of the two writers, Dollimore cites Wilde’s intent to influence the French writer André Gide. So Wilde is not only interested in how others influence him, but also in how he can influence others. The primary vehicle of influence in Wildean literature is the dandiacal figure, and the wielding of this power becomes one of his primary
social functions. This self then becomes important because it controls and manipulates other selves and, in turn, is controlled and manipulated.

Both of the essays examined in this thesis are structured in the form of one voice attempting to influence the other and, additionally, that one voice attempting to influence all the readers of the essay. Also, that voice which labors to influence is the dandiacal voice.

In “The Critic as Artist,” one of the ways Gilbert influences is by speaking about the nature of influence itself. For Gilbert, influence itself is a extremely powerful element. It matters little whether or not the influence is judged good or evil by the ones who are either experiencing it or observing it. He claims:

Each little thing that we do passes into the great machine of life, which may grind our virtues to powder and make them worthless, or transform our sins into elements of a new civilization, more marvelous and more splendid than any that has gone before. (560)

All influence, then, possesses endless possibilities, and those possibilities are only faintly connected to the original occurrence of the influential action. The nature of Wildean influence is much like the nature of the Wildean self in that the self, and its influence, is released from judgment and therefore is able to exercise greater power and greater beauty.

Within the larger context of influence, Gilbert’s advocacy of the role of critic is simultaneously an advocacy of the role of dandy. The dandy is a social position which allows a self to receive and give the greatest amount of influence. He is accepted into society because of the established position of the dandy, and he is also expected and even at times encouraged to challenge that society. The critic occupies a similar position. He is accepted as part of the artistic and academic community, and he is expected to challenge that community. The social position of these two elements of an ideal self allows that self to be a crossroad of influence.
Similar to Gilbert's advocacy of the role of critic as essential to the dandiacal self, Vivian in "The Decay of Lying" advocates lying as an ideal means for the artist, another essential role for the dandiacal self, to influence. Without lying, the artist, and consequently the dandiacal self, suffers because he loses a significant portion of his ability to influence. Lying is influential because it is separate, and superior, to Life. If the artist presents Life, then he merely informs and does not perform one his most important functions, the function of influencing. According to Vivian, the artist must lie because Art herself lies. He equates Art, traditionally viewed as an inanimate object, with a self that is mysterious and unreliable, and therefore beautiful and powerfully influential. Vivian claims:

Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself.  
She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance.  
She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread. (160)

Interestingly, Vivian personifies Art as female and labels her influential, and her influence is expressed through the male artist's own lying. Such an arrangement hints at a procreation metaphor; however, in The Picture of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry justifies unbridled expression in Art because he claims Art is sterile. Lord Henry states, "Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame" (163). If Lord Henry, like Gilbert, views Art as female then his aim may be to eradicate the female influence by sterilizing the expression of female sexuality, the most obvious demonstration being procreation. This conclusion follows if a reader catches Lord Henry's animosity toward women in the text as a whole. For example, he is not at all
fond of his wife and in fact makes many disparaging comments about the female
gender throughout the novel. At one point he claims, rather bitterly, “the only
way a woman can ever reform a man is by boring him so completely that he
loses all possible interest in life” (83). By rendering Art sterile, Lord Henry
implies that it is the artist, the male, the dandy, who should receive all the credit
for influencing.

This passage, in which Wilde uses a dominant voice to contradict one of
his own essays, may have been added after publishers and the public rejected the
first, magazine publication as immoral (*Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, 1890).
Wilde did add a short preface to the book publication in 1891 and addressed the
issue within the text, as well.

Instead of Art, the primary influential factor for the novel is Lord Henry, a
dandy. Before his defense of Art as sterile and therefore non-influential, Lord
Henry claims that “There is no such thing as a good influence [. . .] All influence
is immoral--immoral from the scientific point of view” (13). Here, Lord Henry
echoes Gilbert, and he continues to do so by participating in the influence of
Dorian Gray, who is metaphorically a blank slate for both Basil and Lord Henry.
Danson asserts that “[w]hat Basil calls Dorian’s personality will be almost literally
ddictated to him in the form of Lord Henry’s epigrams, read into him by Lord
Henry’s poisonous book, painted for him by Basil” (“Impermanence” 89).
Dorian, then, really undergoes a conglomeration of influences and, in turn, he is
a pernicious influence on others. Yet Wilde rescues the autonomous act of
influence by keeping the two influencing figures of Lord Henry and Basil above
the dark abyss into which Dorian sinks. Therefore, they cannot be held
responsible for Dorian’s actions, even though Basil warns Dorian at the
beginning, “He [Lord Henry] has a very bad influence over all his friends” (12).
Also, the narration helps to extinguish any responsibility on Basil or Lord
Henry’s part. The narrator states, “The worship of the senses has often, and
with much justice, been decried, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves” (95). With this statement, the debauchery of Dorian comes down to his own personal weakness, not to Lord Henry’s influence and insistence that he submit himself to his senses.

Along with the Wildean dandy Lord Henry, the dandiacal figure of Algernon in The Importance of Being Earnest is also an immoral influence. Algernon’s influence, however, even though it is in a sense dangerous, is much more playful than Lord Henry’s. None of the others characters really ever take Algernon’s advice. He is in fact an impotent character. His influence is more of an entertainment than a driving force. Algernon enacts Lord Henry’s conception of Art, that Art is sterile. Yet his presence influences the actions of others by his mere presentation of self in dandiacal form. This ideal Wildean representation of influence enacted by Algernon is very subversive to Victorian ideals of masculine virility. Wilde suggests here that sterility and passivity are the greater influences.

This presentation of self projects a non-threatening aura because in the play no one really acts outside of accepted standards. All unacceptable behavior is told or spoken. This allows for the comfortable situation at the end of the play where the heterosexual couples are paired off, family stability is established, and what started out as Jack’s lie becomes the absolute truth. Wilde’s sense of middle class resolution mingled with contradictory messages is uncanny in the conclusion of this, his last societal drama. Once again, this Wildean work sustains the primary influential figure as the most dandiacal figure.

Leadership Redefined

Along with its powerful influence, the Wildean dandiacal self also possesses significant leadership ability. While influence certainly plays a significant part in any leadership, Wilde’s redefinition of leadership for the dandy
is distinctly different from the dandy's role of influencer and influencee. The nature of influence for the Wildean dandy is very personal and typically a one-on-one situation; whereas, the dandy's role of leader is more social in that it addresses and affects a larger group of individuals.

This redefinition of leadership by the Wildean dandy is by far his most serious endeavor. The glaring practicality of this aspect of Wilde's dandy can be traced to his time as editor of Woman's World from November of 1887 to July of 1889. Wilde certainly ascertained the necessity of leadership with this powerful and prosperous position. This seriousness also stems from the fact that Wilde grew up in a home which idolized leadership, position, and power. His father steadily built his medical practice, violently opposed Catholicism, and eventually was knighted. Wilde's mother, while attracted to nationalist causes and Catholicism, was more interested in presiding over high society. Pulido states, "Lady Wilde staunchly defended the role the high bred woman is called to play in society where her mastery of the art of conversation would allow her to exert a life-long power" (324). Currently, more and more critical attention is being paid to Lady Wilde's influence on Oscar. Small notes that many Wildean critics are beginning seriously to research the "copious correspondence to him" from Lady Wilde (Revalued 25). Like Lady Wilde's call to return to the lost leader of the society hostess, Wilde, according to Fang, "asserts that society sooner of later must return to this 'lost leader';" the dandy (227). The lost leader of the Wildean dandy is the same lost leader as the liar/artist in "The Decay of Lying." Vivian claims, "Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar" (158). The leader-dandy is composed of both critic and artist and that these roles within the larger role of dandy are composed of various Wildean aspects. Wilde's leader is the male dandy, a figure who repudiates the necessity of heterosexual marriage unlike the figure of the society hostess, whose very position necessitates traditional heterosexual marriage, built upon the foundation
of capitalism. This facet of the leader-dandy is one of the many ways in which Wilde redefines traditional notions of leadership.

One of the aspects that makes the Wildean dandy a leader is that the dandy is required, by his self-defined social role, to luxuriate in a decadent individualism. It is decadent because, as Dollimore states, "Wilde's notion of individualism is inseparable from transgressive desire and a transgressive aesthetic" (52). Wilde's individualism is therefore not capitalistic, as with much of commercialized American individualism. Instead it is in many ways a means of expressing one's sexuality and of privileging the senses.

Another way that Wilde redefines leadership is evidenced in "The Critic as Artist" when Gilbert claims: "If you wish to understand others you must intensify your own individualism" (570). A leader must understand the ones he leads. Traditionally, erasing the leader's individualism is perceived as a means to a good understanding of his followers. Yet Gilbert offers the opposite approach. The approach to leadership that Gilbert suggests is in harmony with a aspect of Wilde's ethos, the aspect of theoria. Intensifying the self's individualism is less about doing, and more about being. Here, Ellmann describes Wilde's leader-dandy:

Wilde [...] offered the heraldic figure of the new man, the 'do-nothing,' a creature who emerges only after five in the afternoon, what used to be called 'the lounge lizard.' In a period when Victorians were infernally busy in misdoing everything, what really needed to be recognized was what he called 'the importance of doing absolutely nothing.' Under cover of indolence, which others were free to call decadence, if they liked, Wilde proposed to transform society. (a long the riverrun 6)

Wilde's leader-dandy does not lead by smothering individualism in favor of mass conformity of action and of thought. He creates a following by
concentrating on the development of the self as a suggestion to others to intensify their own individualism.

Besides glorifying individualism, Gilbert also observes the debilitating effect of the notion of fairness upon leadership. He states, “The man who sees both sides of a question is a man who sees absolutely nothing at all” (584). The Wildean dandy is unconcerned with the concept of fairness and at times appears absolutely cold-hearted because of this rejection of fair play. Everything about the Wildean leader-dandy must be potent. Nothing must contribute to a diluted presentation of his self. Therefore, fairness is obliterated because it softens and washes out the brilliant display of the dandiacal self. And it is this display that constitutes how the Wildean dandy leads.

The dandy leads through the demolition of fairness in part because his presentation is in fact a mockery of the society that he intends to change. Consequently, the leader-dandy cannot and, according to Wilde, does not desire to be fair because the concept of fairness obscures his goal of global reevaluation. Jerusha McCormack posits, “Despising the society into which he seeks initiation, the dandy takes his revenge by creating himself in its image, miming its clothes, its manners and mannerisms” (270). The elitist society which sustains the dandy is both exaggerated and demolished with the dandy’s leadership through his presentation of self.

In The Picture of Dorian Gray Lord Henry enacts the role of the ideal dandiacal leader. He is accepted into the best society, and all the while he mocks and exaggerates that society with his transgressive individualism and potent presentation of self. Lord Henry also takes very definite intellectual positions to strengthen his dandiacal leadership. He insists to Basil, “It is only the intellectually lost who ever argue” (9). A leader, of course, cannot be lost, or else he is an ineffectual leader. By refusing to argue over issues, the dandiacal leader asserts his dominance and maintains the disinterestedness of the intellectual elite.
Additionally, Lord Henry enacts his superior dandiacal leadership by his demonstration of bravery. He claims, “The reason we all like to think so well of others is that we are all afraid for ourselves. The basis of optimism is sheer terror” (54). With this comment, Lord Henry redefines traditional notions of bravery. He deems himself brave because he does not think well of others, despite the social and emotional consequences of this action. His self-inflicted confrontation of existential fear places him on the border of social disapproval and threatens his capacity to face the chaos of the human experience. He refuses to be an optimist and consequently faces the terror and horror of the human condition. This act demonstrates his bravery and solidifies his leadership.

Dandiacal leadership is also displayed in The Importance of Being Earnest. Algernon’s passivity and effeminacy in dandiacal leadership are validated by the comments of the other characters. For instance, when speaking of her henpecked father, Gwendolen states confidently, “The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man” (290). Comments such as these lead some critics to assert Wilde’s goal of feminism in dandiacal leadership. For example, Fang contends that

[a]s a homosexual, Wilde perceived that his position was as precarious as women in traditional patriarchal society. This might be one of the reasons that he ardently supported and aligned himself with many of the feminists of his time in their fight for economic autonomy and a more egalitarian relation with men. (182)

However, Fang fails to connect another piece of evidence that he provides later. He explains, “Elaine Showalter and Carol Dyhouse point out [that] feminist involvement with imaginative literature […] was probably at its height in the 1890s” (184). Given Wilde’s intense misogynistic attitude, a more probable thesis would be that he was doing what every other popular playwright was doing at
the time, that is, supporting fashionable feminist causes, regardless of personal beliefs.

Gagnier also dismisses the possibility of Wilde’s feminism. She points out that there was an “antifeminist thread running through the polemical homosexual literature of [Wilde’s] period” (“Sexuality” 41), and that Wilde was most definitely the most “out” gay English writer at the time. As further evidence, Gagnier details Wilde’s aesthetic disgust with the mature female body. She states:

Wilde’s basic argument is against the unaesthetic bodies of Victorian women, particularly when they are pregnant, and the fact that their function as producers of children has wrenched from women the possibility of so-called nonpurposive, that is merely pleasurable, passion; just as domestic servitude had deprived women of the opportunity to pursue merely pleasing intellectual study. (“Sexuality” 40)

Thus, Wilde is not feminist. In fact, he operates within the same domain as the heterosexual, patriarchal society. It is a society in which women’s bodies are viewed as either objects of desire or objects of scorn. Wilde’s sexuality in no way sensitizes him to woman’s place. Rather it merely places him on the opposite spectrum from his heterosexual counterpart, and together they, in effect, complete the circle of oppression. They each dehumanize the female by objectifying her body to fit their leadership agenda.

Wilde’s social role of the dandy is comprised of and operates out of the environment of decadence, the nature and power of influence, and the call for redefining leadership. These primary elements help construct a social self which is artificial, exaggerated, and subversive.
CONCLUSION

As demonstrated by this thesis, the ideal Wildean self is, if nothing else, multi-essenced. The term *multi-essence* is a bit oxymoronic because the term *essence* denotes permanence; it denotes a nonmutable, stable element of being. If a self is multi-essenced, then that self is by necessity mutable and unstable. Consequently, Wilde’s advocacy of being multi-essenced is paradoxical to the traditional understanding that each individual possesses one essence that is natural and dependable.

As noted in Chapter One, there is some significant debate on the degree to which a reader can take Wilde seriously, since his primary medium is comedy, even in his essays and his dark, decadent novel. Part of this difficulty originates out of Wilde’s own redefinition of seriousness. If Wilde sneered at the seriousness of his fellow Victorians, then as a student and an artist he needed to recreate a seriousness of his own. Wilde’s seriousness is, not surprisingly, paradoxical in relation to the seriousness of the middle-class ethos he knew so well. In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert pleads with Ernest, “Don’t let us discuss anything solemnly. I am but too conscious of the fact that we are born in an age when only the dull are treated seriously, and I live in terror of not being misunderstood” (552). Yet discussion is the primary action of the characters of Wilde’s works. The importance of the works is revealed through the dialogue of the characters. Their actions are done off-stage or beyond the scope of the text. Therefore, discussion is serious in that it is necessary for the work to exist at all. However, the discussion is also humorous, entertaining, and shocking and claims to be fanciful rather than serious because it strives not to be dull and it strives to confuse and challenge the serious reader.
Another aspect of Wildean work that hinders the serious reader from discerning the sincerity of Wilde is that in the works examined in this thesis, Wilde never directly speaks with an overt voice. The only area in which one could make a possible, weak claim to Wilde's overt voice would be the sparse narration in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though authorial intention is always questionable, with Wilde the problem is intensified. Consequently, there is ample room and evidence for each position that asserts what material projects Wilde's voice, what material is "serious," and what material is purely entertainment. Yet, given that the ideal Wildean self is multi-essenced, all the voices could theoretically be Wilde's, and no one single voice could actually be his because he refuses to be of one essence. By insisting that the self is multi-essenced and is constructed artificially, Wilde liberates the artistic process for himself and for his readers. This is an area where Wilde demonstrates a decided break with his Victorian background. Unlike the work of Charles Dickens or George Eliot, Wilde's work truly demonstrates that "all interpretations [are] true and no interpretation [is] final" ("Critic" 568). Consequently, it is left up to the reader, the critic, to create meaning from the presentation of Wilde's technique.

In Chapter Two, Wilde's ethos is connected to his stance of the constructed self. Looking at Wilde's work from its specific milieu, I contrasted his ideal of *theoria* with the predominant Victorian ethos which developed largely from off-shoots of Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism. In his advocacy of contemplation, Wilde's conception of work holds self-cultivation as an ideal, while his society's notion of work demanded results outside the self, results that benefited not the self, but a large group of faceless and nameless individuals. In "The Decay of Lying," Vivian claims that in art (and since life reflects art, the self's existence can be substituted here), "We don't want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders" (151). Though the comment is unkind, it rejects the art of results, the art of reality, and favors the
art of contemplation, the art of constructing the self.

Also in Chapter Two, Wilde's use of aesthetic historicism as an important part of his ethos is connected with his ideal of the constructed self. Wilde continues the Oxfordian tradition of theoria and aesthetic historicism as responses to the increasing vulgarity of Europe, and specifically to England's base worship of monetary prosperity over ideals. In "The Decay of Lying" Vivian claims that "England is the home of lost ideas" (150). Because of England's intense interest in results, results that are often veiled with notions of sincerity and stability, it has, according to Vivian, lost its sense of wonder, its appreciation for the liar, and its sense of respect for the truly great artistic achievements of Western civilization. For Wilde and his predecessors, some type of practiced aesthetic historicism, gained through contemplation, is one answer to this problem.

As evidenced by the quotation from Gagnier in Chapter Two, contemplation had also been a means for passive expression of homosexuality. Although Wilde advocates contemplation philosophically, he also engaged openly, for his time that is, in an active homosexual lifestyle. This tension is evident in The Picture of Dorian Gray when Dorian eschews watching (as in his relationship with Sibyl) in favor of action (action not reported to the readers) which is socially unacceptable. Dorian's fatal choice is in direct opposition to Lord Henry's and Basil's socially acceptable positions as watchers. The term aesthetic then becomes dual. It serves as an adjective for the philosophies of theoria and aesthetic historicism. It also serves as an adjective that disregards the physical withdrawal these two positions demand by describing Dorian's constructed, active existence. While Wilde certainly enjoyed the upper-middle-class lifestyle and made a huge success off his predominately middle-class audience, he also expressed in his works the ideals of theoria and aesthetic historicism for the self and the tensions that an actively expressed homosexuality brings to these historical, scholarly, and intellectually constructed positions.
While Chapter Two focuses largely on the personal duties or goals of the Wildean self, Chapter Three concentrates on Wilde’s technical, literary foundation for expressing this constructed self. The technique highlighted in Chapter Three is Wilde’s innovation of mask and pose. Wilde’s simultaneous emphasis and de-emphasis of personality are methods by which he constructs and advocates masks and poses as ideal means for expression of the self. Wilde exaggerates the personalities of his characters to the point where personality itself becomes a mask. Wilde cleverly performs this feat to side-step the traditional technique of character development which necessitates characters possessing one true personality. Additionally, Wilde’s prolific use of mask and pose in the form of personality creates a smoke screen for his persona as writer and at the same time credits the use of personality as a creative force.

Along with personality, another Wildean method that sustains masks and poses for his characters and himself is the brilliant use of paradoxical epigrams and aphorisms. As noted by Gopnik, Wilde forces a conversational style into his work. This technique further prevents any traditional character development and supports Wilde’s theory of the self’s being composed of artificial masks and poses. Wilde’s use of paradoxical aphorisms and epigrams is supported by an underlying philosophy of subjectivism. The subjective nature of Wildean textual conversation contributes to the development of mask and pose and accounts for the absence of sincere, traditional characters who use their essential selves as guides for the reader to discover truth.

While Chapter Two is largely internal and Chapter Three is technical, Chapter Four pushes the Wildean self into the public arena. Wilde’s primary personal and literary role for the public self is the role of the dandy. The dandy’s decadent environment is key to Wilde’s reinterpretation of this European social figure. This environment allows the Wildean dandy to refigure his own position from the marginal to the elemental. Also, this decadent environment ironically
brings in significant religious issues with its attraction to and even obsession with decadent Catholicism. The soul and its fate become then central issues that the Wildean, decadent dandy must face and challenge in the sense-oriented environment he creates.

Because the Wildean dandy’s position is elevated, he is very influential. The ideal self, then, is socially active in a very subversive and powerful way. And not only is the dandy interested in influencing, he also enjoys the darkly sensuous experience of being influenced himself. This dandiacal self is ideally both a prophet and a receptor. The Wildean dandy’s prophetic role is most actively played out in his redefinition of leadership. Wilde’s dandiacal leadership is both individualistic and dominant in its pose of passivity and effeminacy. For example, my reader will note the profuse use of the pronoun he in this thesis. Wilde’s dandiacal leadership for the constructed self was intended to have nothing to do with women, though critics have argued otherwise. Though Wilde’s dandy is undoubtedly homosexual, he is also ultra-masculine and so is his leadership. Instead of sympathizing with woman’s oppressed state in patriarchal culture, he further oppresses it by completing the spectrum of objectifying the female form.

For Wilde, constructing a multi-essenced self is achieved through a variety of means. Because of his successful scholarship at Trinity and Oxford, constructing a multi-essenced self takes on philosophic proportions. Also, because of Wilde’s homosexuality, his construction of the self is rife with tensions because of personal, societal, and intellectual constraints and expectations regarding the expression of that sexual orientation. Because he was a serious and talented writer, his construction of the self takes on technical, literary aspects and is displayed through his unique style of character depiction. Because he loved society and its material comforts, his construction of the self assumes a social role that creates, influences (and is influenced), and leads. Wilde
demonstrates through his work the aesthetic superiority of constructing a multi-essenced self over that of accepting a given, natural single-essenced existence.
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